



Birding on the roof of the world

Promoting low-impact nature tourism for conservation and livelihoods in the Hindu Kush Karakoram Pamir Landscape

Photo: Imran Shah

Landscape ecology and biodiversity

The transboundary Hindu Kush Karakoram Pamir Landscape (HKPL) – a biodiversity-rich location spanning parts of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan – is home to six protected areas: the Wakhan National Park of Afghanistan; the Taxkorgan Nature Reserve of China; the Broghil, Qurumber, and Khunjerab national parks of Pakistan; and the Zorkul Nature Reserve of Tajikistan. Together, these physically connected protected areas cover 33,000 square kilometres, just under half of the total area of the landscape.

As part of the western Hindu Kush Himalaya, the HKPL lies at a junction of several important biogeographical regions. A unique diversity of flora and fauna, including 306 bird species, flourish in its cold desert ecosystem.

Birds are an integral part of the HKPL's biodiversity. The region's wetlands, rangelands, and peatlands are the natural habitat of a wide variety of resident and migratory

The region's forests, wetlands, rangelands, and peatlands serve as natural habitat for a wide variety of resident and migratory birds.

birds. The landscape is an important migratory corridor, hosting staging and breeding grounds for several species including the Critically Endangered sociable lapwing and the Endangered steppe eagle, saker falcon, and Pallas's fish eagle.

As ecological indicators of habitat quality, birds provide important information about ecosystem health for conservation planning, setting management priorities, and measuring the success of restoration efforts. In the HKPL, the six contiguous protected areas present opportunities for transboundary cooperation for biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.

Bird diversity in the protected areas of the HKPL

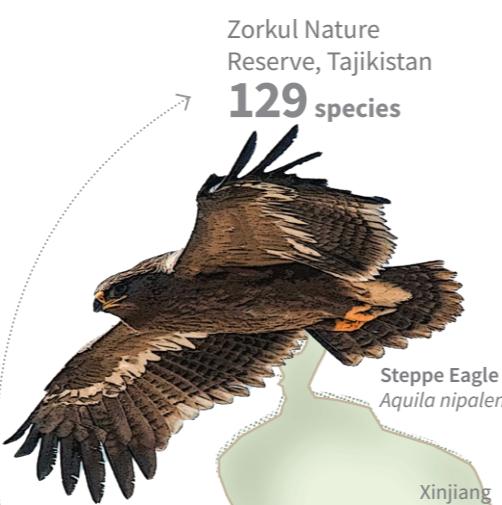
6
protected areas

33,000 km²
of protected area out of the total 67,506 km²

Total
306
bird species

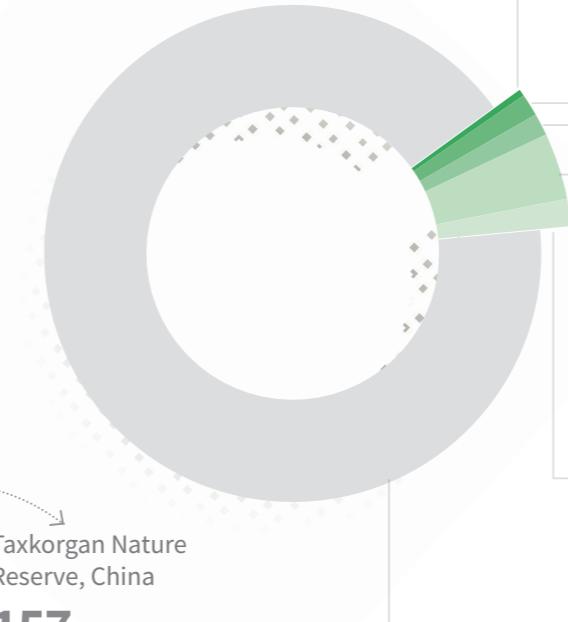
Wakhan National Park, Afghanistan
226 species

TAJIKISTAN



CHINA

Xinjiang



9 bird species
Threatened

12 bird species
Near Threatened

280 bird species
Least Concern



AFGHANISTAN

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Broghil National Park, Pakistan
87 species

PAKISTAN

Qurumber National Park, Pakistan
81 species

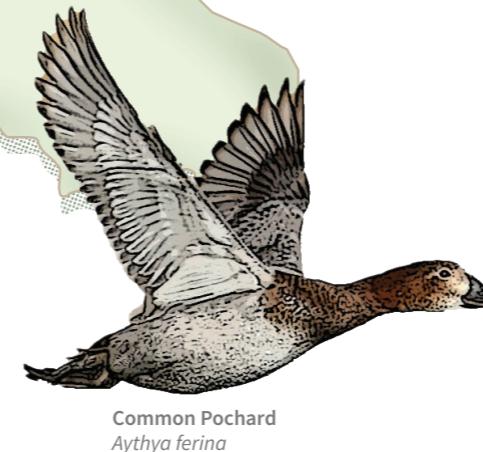
Khunjerab National Park, Pakistan
79 species



Hindu Kush Karakoram Pamir Landscape



Hindu Kush Himalaya region



Distribution of bird species in countries

50
bird species are common to all four HKPL countries: Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan

62
bird species are common to three of four HKPL countries

66
species of birds are common to two of four HKPL countries

Threatened species: Estimated global population of mature individuals, population trends, and habitat



Sociable lapwing
Vanellus gregarius

11,200

>50% decline over the past 27 years
Grassland and desert



Steppe eagle
Aquila nipalensis

50,000–75,000

58.6% decline between 1997 and 2011 and 2013 and 2015
Grassland



Saker falcon
Falco cherrug

12,200–29,800

50–79% decline over the past 19 years
Inland wetland and artificial terrestrial land



Pallas's fish eagle
Haliaeetus leucoryphus

1,000–2,499

Moderate and ongoing population decline with a single migratory population
Inland wetland



Egyptian vulture
Neophron percnopterus

12,000–38,000

Rapid population decline across its range
Rocky areas such as inland cliffs and mountain peaks



Yellow-eyed pigeon
Columba eversmanni

1,000–2,499

Rapid population decline
Arable land and shrubland



Eastern imperial eagle
Aquila heliaca

2,500–9,999

Rapid decline in small global population
Forest and inland wetland



European turtle-dove
Streptopelia turtur

12,800,000–47,600,000

Rapid decline across most of its range
Forest, shrubland, and arable land



Common pochard
Aythya ferina

NA

Rapid population decline across the majority of its range
Inland wetland



Bird watching in the HKPL

Bird watching, a form of wildlife tourism, is undertaken with the intent of viewing wild birds in their natural habitats. In recent years, bird watching tourism has emerged as an important ecotourism activity. It has proven valuable in accruing economic benefits to local communities, particularly those in habitats identified as important bird areas.

With its breathtaking landscapes and mountain ranges rich in biodiversity, the HKPL is a veritable treasure trove. Its protected areas hold promising prospects for avid birders as well as vacationing bird watchers – due, in large part, to the vast populations of high-altitude birds, desert birds, and other interesting river and valley birds that are found here. The landscape is, after all, home to spring and autumn stopovers for migratory waterfowl and raptors, and provides nesting grounds for geese, ducks, herons, and ibises.

Despite immense potential for developing bird watching tourism in the landscape, poor infrastructure and documentation have impeded its development.

Recommendations for developing bird-based tourism in the landscape

Research and knowledge generation

- Studies on the status of bird species, their distribution, and migratory routes across the landscape
- Scoping study with stakeholders to map out important bird areas and potential sites for bird-based tourism

Infrastructure development

- Investments to build necessary tourism infrastructure such as the construction of bird watching towers

Awareness and capacity building of local stakeholders

- Establishment of tourism centres and a code of conduct for tourists and tour operators
- Training on ecotourism for local residents, training of nature guides
- Collaborations with local tourism boards and other stakeholders to promote tourism sites and develop promotional materials

For further information

Lily Shrestha
Srijana Joshi

Lily.Shrestha@icimod.org
Srijana.Joshi@icimod.org

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Photos: Imran Shah, Yang Zhigang,
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